



**Jazz Articles** by Bob Taylor  
from *The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!*  
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**Article 7:  
The Wall-to-Wall  
Music Phenomenon**

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## **The Wall-to-Wall Music Phenomenon**

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Recently I spent a Saturday adjudicating high school jazz bands at a college jazz festival. Everything went smoothly – I particularly enjoyed having 30-minute time slots instead of 20, as well as the chance to meet personally with some of the bands and talk about performance techniques.

As I listened throughout the day, I heard some good bands, some young bands – some good soloists and some young soloists. But there was one interesting (and worrisome?) theme that repeatedly played itself out in the improvised solos:

➤ Wall-to-wall carpet!

(Or wall-to-wall music.) Meaning, soloists would play a steady stream of notes, stopping only when they made a mistake or when they needed to breathe (and rhythm section soloists could even breathe on their own time).

So why the fascination with non-stop playing? You'd think it would be easier to play fewer notes in a solo!

▶ Why do young players feel the need to cover every musical space?

### **Non-Stop Coverage**

I did some pondering (nothing too heavy, mind you) on the subject and came up with this: We are **conditioned**.

For example, turn on the TV or radio to your favorite station, and what you *won't* hear (hopefully) is “dead-air” – that awkward pause of silence where nothing happens (followed by an apology or an awkward transition).

Or perhaps you've been in an apartment where the carpet doesn't quite reach the wall. Your first inclination is to find something quick to cover the bare space.

Soloists will often approach a solo in much the same way – they feel an Inner Urge (not the Joe Henderson tune) to cover every musical space. If that space is not covered, the soloist will think that the *audience* will think:

- “Hmmm ... so you don’t know what to play on that chord ...”
- “Run out of ideas there?”
- “You don’t really know what you’re doing, right?”

And here’s the irony (and I smile just thinking about this :- ) ...

Soloists who are in the habit of playing wall-to-wall notes actually *set up the expectation* that a break in the action means a problem is happening. Sure enough, when we get used to hearing non-stop notes, a sudden silence is puzzling.

Yes, long phrases can be an adrenaline rush for the player, but the cost is often too high – phrases suffer, and we want more and more notes (and less silence).

► What are the pros and cons of “non-stop” solo lines?

### Constant Playing – The Pros ↑

On the positive side, long solo lines can be exciting. For example, John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” is a familiar example of long solo lines, masterfully played over a challenging chord progression. And that is a tempting mark to match, as witnessed by the thousands of jazz players who embark on “the perfect storms” of long lines at fast tempos.

Here’s one example of a long line that exceeded expectations. A few years ago I heard Wynton Marsalis perform at the University of Utah. At one point in the concert, he announced that his next tune would be “Cherokee” – one of those landmark “long-line” tunes that’s a challenge for most improvisers. When he kicked off the tune, I have to admit I was a bit disappointed – the tempo was only *medium*. But what followed was a truly stunning example of long-line artistry.

As I remember it, Wynton played nearly four consecutive solo choruses non-stop, with a constant and glimmering stream of eighth-notes. The contours twisted and turned artfully, and in one breath (circular) he told you everything you needed to know about Cherokee. The need for speed was overcome by the heart of the art.

### Constant Playing – The Cons ↓

Long lines are challenging for the artist, but they can also be challenging for the audience. It’s hard to absorb all the information in a long line, and in many cases, long lines are high in note inflation. The better the line (alá the Marsalis example), the better the chance listeners will stay with it.

Long lines are usually tied to familiar patterns and rote playing, so there is less chance of “accident.” This leads to predictable music, and – what I witnessed at the recent jazz festival – the following musical “illnesses:”

\* “Blues-scale epidemic” – Most soloists at the festival latched on so hard to the blues scale that it couldn’t be pried from their fingers, even playing it where it didn’t belong.

\* “Wave epidemic” – The blues scale went up and it went down, up and down, up and down ... (are we getting seasick yet?) ...

\* “Root-and-downbeat epidemic” – The blues scale starts on the root, and so did most solo phrases – and “time” starts on beat one, and so did most solo phrases. One soloist tried to avoid the predictability of starting every phrase on beat one – by instead starting every phrase on beat two. Hmm ...

### Conversational Impact of Wall-to-Wall Music

Wall-to-wall music has another side effect – it stifles musical interaction. At the festival, I heard polished lines, fine ensemble sound, clean entrances – and very little interaction between rhythm section and soloist.

First, it’s the soloist’s responsibility to talk less and say more. For example, if you meet someone who starts a conversation – and won’t stop – chances are you just politely listen and eventually tune them out. And that’s what happens with soloists, especially in a big-band setting; too many notes equals too little chance for musical feedback and conversation.

Next, the rhythm section needs to think beyond timekeeping/chord running. It needs to be an interactive idea pool, supporting and encouraging the soloist’s ideas.

In the worst case, we can end up with a “lobotomized band” – one with a rhythm section that essentially disconnected from the soloists. And that sometimes spreads to a disconnect in ensemble playing, apart from the solo sections.

► How do we fix these “epidemics” in jazz solos?

### The Answers are So Close ...

Now back to the epidemics for a moment - they are “curable” with a few simple treatments.

1. Convert rote blues scales to *flexible* blues scales. Use unpredictable contours and wider skips (b3 up to b7, #4 down to b7, etc.).
2. Encourage the use of *expanded* blues scales, adding the 2, natural 3, and 6 – see *The Art of Improvisation* for a discussion of expanded blues scales. (I was *so* thirsty to hear something beyond the basic blues scale in the festival solos ...)

3. Go “next door” – instead of starting on the root, try the 2 or the 7 (or 6). Instead of starting on beat 1, try beat 2, beat 4, and all the “ands” ...

It’s amazing what a difference these small suggestions can make in building interest in solos, especially for those newer to improvising.

### **And So Far Away ...**

The real power in improvisation gets unleashed through the artful use of *motifs*, *silence and development*. These concepts seem mystical to many soloists, but they are a lot simpler to learn than some of the assignments my daughters have taken home from their high school AP courses!

When motifs, silence, and development are combined with SHAPE (See, Hear And Play Expressively) in a live performance, the results can be electrifying. The audience is drawn into the musical story being created, and the performer-listener connection is strong.

### **\* Next Time**

The power of silence ...

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